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SUBJECT: GAZA HUMANITARIAN UPDATE, JANUARY 15, 1700 HRS

REF: TEL AVIV 0115

1. (SBU) The Joint Coordination Room (JCR) convened a 9:30 meeting to introduce the newly appointed Minister for Humanitarian Affairs, Yitzhak Herzog, to the diplomatic and international organizations communities in order to demonstrate the GOI's priority on maintaining humanitarian aid for Gazan civilians through the creation of a cabinet-level policy coordination position. As the Minister listened to the international community's concerns, including overnight shelling near an ICRC residence in Gaza and IDF soldiers surrounding two UNRWA hospitals and preventing entry and egress, the situation suddenly took a turn for the worse (reftel). In real time, participants learned that two hospitals, Al-Qods and Tal al-Hawa, had been hit during nearby close-quarters firefights between IDF and Hamas militants. Moments later, the UNRWA compound in Gaza had been hit and was burning, and flames threatened to ignite the center's fuel storage tanks.

2. (SBU) As of 1600 hours, a fire at Al-Qods Hospital resulting from the morning's incident had been extinguished and some 500 patients were being moved to other hospitals; several UNRWA workers near the al-Qods hospital had also been injured. Local and ICRC fire crews, escorted by the IDF, reached the UNRWA compound headquarters, and had brought this blaze under control, but apparently too late. While the IDF managed to move UN fuel trucks so that they did not catch fire, the UNRWA warehouse and many tons of foods and medicines were destroyed by the fire.

3. (SBU) PM Olmert apologized to UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon, in Israel today, for today's shelling of the UNRWA compound, but appeared to justify the action by claiming that "Hamas attacked FROM WITHIN the UNRWA building during our humanitarian pause." (Comment: Since UNRWA and other UN officials reported the compound being hit by Israeli shells and the flammable phosphorus debris -- likely to have come from IDF smoke rounds -- well BEFORE the 1100 humanitarian pause, as confirmed also by constant USG contact with UNRWA personnel in the compound, Olmert's statement appears patently inaccurate.) Ban Ki-Moon also met with MinDef Barak, who said that Hamas is using UN installations for cover and using civilians as human shields. But Ban Ki-Moon, in his press conference with FM Livni, reported that Barak had apologized for this "grave mistake" and "assured the UNSYG that extra attention would be paid to the UN facilities and that this should not be repeated." (Note: Embassy also lobbied IDF contacts along these lines. END NOTE). ICRC President Kellenberger met with FM Livni and MinDef Barak in Jerusalem today. Livni asked Kellenberger to request access to captured IDF soldier Gilad Shalit to assess his condition.

4. (SBU) Repairs and refueling of the Bayt Lahiya sewage lagoon and pumping plant were completed by the Gazan operator, CMWU. Two Palestinian repair teams, escorted by the ICRC, are working daily to restore power lines at Shifa

hospital and have restored 74% of the pre-incursion generation capacity.

¶5. (SBU) 71 truckloads of humanitarian supplies (34 food, 5 medical supplies) transited through Kerem Shalom today. Karni was expected to handle 60 truckloads of grain and animal feed, but nothing passed through due to fighting in Gaza City. UNRWA did not run any trucks today. Nahal Oz was open, but fuel could not be transferred because the tanks on the Gazan side were still full. Erez was open or humanitarian cases, but none came to the crossing. At Kerem Shalom, the addition of a fourth lane and a second fuel line should be completed by Sunday. These improvements will double fuel handling capacity and increase throughput to up to 150 trucks per day. JCR chief Spiegel told EconCouns that the GOI had also agreed with the Egyptians to allow convoys of Egyptian supply trucks from Nitzana through Kerem Shalom.

¶6. (SBU) Kerem Shalom should be open tomorrow. Erez should be open for coordinated movement of international community staff and for humanitarian cases. The JCR would like Karni and Nahal Oz to open, but the final decision rests with the Southern Command.

¶7. (SBU) Following on today's pilot four-hour humanitarian pause, tomorrow's and Saturday's pauses will also last four hours, at which point a decision will be taken as to whether to extend four-hour pauses. Today's four-hour pause was totally ineffective within Gaza City. Thousands of Gaza City civilians tried to flee, but but had nowhere to go.

¶8. (SBU) There was a small, noisy but peaceful demonstration

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in front of Embassy Tel Aviv (20-30 young Israelis) supporting ongoing IDF operations and demanding the return of Gilad Shalit.

¶9. (SBU) Rockets from Gaza continued to hit Israel today. 17 rockets from Gaza hit Israel before the pause; another ten hit during the humanitarian pause. A rocket that hit a car in Be'ersheva injured six; two, a woman and a child, were injured seriously.

¶10. (U) Israeli media, citing Palestinian sources, announced that an IAF strike on Gaza City killed two of Hamas' most senior officials: Interior Minister Said Siam and security apparatus head Salah Abu Shreh. Six other Hamas operatives were reportedly killed in the same strike.

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